

Sunday School

PAUL'S STORY OF HIS LIFE.

November 21, 1909. 2 Cor. 11:22-28; 12:1-10.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness."—2 Cor. 12:9.

DAILY HOME READINGS.

M.—2 Cor. 11: 21-33. Th.—2 Cor. 13.
T.—2 Cor. 12:1-10. F.—Gal. 1:11-24.
W.—2 Cor. 10:1-12. S.—Gal. 4:12-18.
Eph. 3:1-12.

TOPICAL OUTLINE.

How Paul Sets Us an Example—

Of suffering for Christ, vs. 22-28.

Of visions in Christ, ch. 12:1-6.

Of the sufficient grace of Christ, vs. 7-10.

LESSON COMMENTS.

The lesson under consideration (2 Cor. 11:22-28; 12:1-10) is not rightly termed a "Story of His (Paul's) Life." It is Paul's defense of himself against "false brethren," by whose accusations and insinuations his personal and apostolic character was imperiled. A brief recital of the most prominent facts will make this most evident.

More time, labor, teaching and suffering had been given to the founding of the church in the city of Corinth than to any other upon the continent of Europe. Its birth was with much suffering. Its position in a great commercial city of 1,000,000 people, representing many nations and many beliefs, a mixture of all the devices of Satan, rendered it certain that a church of the Lord Jesus would be speedily and thoroughly tested. All the powers usually wielded by the devil for the extermination, or at least paralysis, of a church were invoked for the purpose of the utter ruin of the very church whose life and work could have a more telling influence than any of the other churches planted upon Grecian soil.

Soon divisions, sects, appeared in the church—Paulism, Peterism, Apollonism and Christism. Such a condition is the sure preparation for and forerunner of strife, contention, envy, jealousy and all manner of ungodliness. The church was in this downward career when the apostle Paul sent that church his first letter from Ephesus. This letter was borne by or followed soon by Titus, who, it appears, was to stay with the church, see the effect of Paul's letter and, as soon as possible, make careful report to Paul.

After the despatch of this letter many months appear to have passed, all of them crowded with "labors oft," when Paul received, in Philippi, the report of the real status of the church in Corinth. That report was both cheering and annoying. The church had made diligent use of his first letter; its injunctions had been rigidly complied with. A genuine state of sorrow towards God had come to the church, the evidence of which was seen in its repentance, in its watchful and prayerful effort to live worthy of their vocation. Along with this consoling news, however, came the astounding information that a minority who resented the arraignments of his (Paul's) first letter were vigorously and maliciously combatting the apostle's right to assume leadership over them. From a close reading of the entire second letter, it appears that this minority was insinuating many things derogatory to the personal and apostolic character of Paul. The intimations were to the effect that he was no true apostle, having never seen our Lord; that he was assumptuous, forever praising himself; indulged in large talk in his letters; that he was contemptible in appearance; that he was probably personally interested in the collection of money that he was asking for the poor saints in Jerusalem; that he was vacillating in character; sometimes it was "yea," sometimes it was "nay"; he circumcised Timothy, but not Titus; he was sometimes Jew, sometimes Gentile, according to the company he was in; he was always threatening to come to Corinth and never came, etc., etc.

This, in brief, was the state of the case when Paul wrote his second letter to Corinth and to all the saints in Achaia

and sent it as quickly as possible by Titus. It will be seen that this letter contains very generous and unstinted praise for the church there. It is a model outpouring of fatherly tenderness, sympathy and love. He even ventures to warn that they go not too far in the discipline of the incestuous person whose life had so shocked the apostle.

In the lesson before us, it can now be seen, he is endeavoring to do something more than give "a story of his life." Out of that life, using the prominent and indisputable facts in it, he lifts, in peerless eloquence and with the irrefutable power of truth, the defense of his own and of his apostolic character and rights. It recalls the defense of Samuel in the 12th chapter of his first book: "Behold, here am I; witness against me before the Lord and before his anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? whom have I oppressed? of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind mine eyes therewith?"

The defense of his personal character against the aspersions of his defamers precedes, but is closely connected with the present lesson. The last charge refuted and that which but for its most outrageous falsity would have been most damaging, was the intimation that he was personally interested in the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. He simply calls attention to the fact that the church in Corinth was the church that had received his teachings absolutely without pay. His own hands and the aid of other churches had supported him during his eighteen months of toil there.

Addressing himself to the defense of his apostolic character, which would be of little worth without personal character, he proves by three tests that his place is rightly in the front rank of all the apostles. The first test is seen in the sufferings that he endured in order to preach the gospel (2 Cor. 1:33).

The second test adduced is seen in 12:1-6. The visions and revelations accorded him were to him at least indubitable proof that he was "called to be an apostle." Luke mentions the vision at Troas, and in Corinth, and on the ship as they journeyed to Rome—a vision not included in the statements here made. But the apostle appears to refer to a communion with God, a transportation of himself to a mountain top of experience far above, out of or disconnected with the body. What he saw and heard could not find expression in any earthly language. He calls the place "the third heaven."

But the third and chief test—one that should have appealed to his readers most readily—was his life among them. Since that memorable visit to "the third heaven," in order to protect him against the sin that gave birth to the devil, "pride," God had prepared and given him a special means of protection—"a thorn in his side." This thorn—further described as "a messenger of Satan to buffet me," reminding of Job's experiences with this same Satan—was severe enough to test and test thoroughly. Paul, hero though he undoubtedly was, three times besought God to take it away. God did not take it away, but gave him in addition "grace sufficient," so that not only would he be able to bear it, but so that those who witnessed his joy (in spite of such a thorn piercing his side) and his saintliness of life, would be compelled to see the real evidences of an apostle of Jesus Christ.

1. The most trustworthy statement of character is seen in one's behavior under adverse criticism. An insinuation of dishonesty, of inconsistency, of two facedness, etc., will badly jostle a man of small character. Some men have been known to die under such goadings. The true man meets them with the armor of truth.

2. Most men that have been pre-eminently great and that have accomplished great good for their fellow-man have been defamed, caricatured and their motives impugned.

3. There are times when it is better to suffer in silence. "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." There are times when loyalty to the truth requires speech—full and clear defense. If the character of Paul had been successfully assailed or the signs of his apostleship been thrown into the shadow by the aspersions and insinuations of his enemies, the truth would have suffered, the church would have felt the pain and the world would have lost a great heritage.

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